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ABSTRACT

The paper examines critical issues involved in the debate over the Regular Education Initiative (REI) to merge special and regular education, with emphasis on implications for school psychologists. The arguments of proponents and opponents of the REI are summarized and the lack of involvement by school psychologists is noted. The REI is seen to effect school psychologists by a possibly drastic reduction in the demand for professional psychological services in the schools, and by the denial of valuable and necessary psychological services to many special needs students. Specific issues that psychologists need to address are: (1) pupil identification and classification; (2) pupil placement; and (3) changing roles and responsibilities. School psychologists are urged to become more involved in the debate because their expertise is needed, because they have a professional responsibility to contribute, and because REI could have a direct impact on their future employment possibilities. They are urged to become involved at the professional/organizational level and at the local school level. Includes 33 references. (DB)

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE DEBATE FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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ABSTRACT

The most intense and controversial issue presently receiving attention in the special education literature is the Regular Education Initiative (REI) debate. Proponents of the REI are calling for a reevaluation of the policies and practices which have been used to identify, place, and instruct students in special education programs. Opponents argue that these policies and practices are essentially sound, and if substantially altered, they could result in serious harm to special needs students. It is suggested that the contemporary REI discourse has clear and significant implications for school psychologists -- most of whom have been largely silent thus far in this debate.

In this paper several of the most critical issues involved in the REI debate, along with their implications for school psychologists, are examined. Suggested reasons why it is important for school psychologists to become more active participants in this debate are presented and discussed. Finally, selected strategies and mechanisms for effective involvement by school psychologists in the issues and concerns being generated by this debate are offered.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE DEBATE FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

The most intense and controversial issue presently receiving attention in the special education professional literature is the Regular Education Initiative (REI), or as it is sometimes referred to, the General Education Initiative (GEI) debate (Carnine & Kameenui, 1990; Davis, 1989, 1990; Davis & McCaul, 1988; Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990; Kauffman, 1989; Kauffman, Gerber, & Semmel, 1988; Lieberman, 1990; Lilly, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Vergason & Anderegg, 1989). The proposed merger of special education and regular education into a unitary general education system which would have primary responsibility for all students in our public schools -- including identified handicapped students as well as those students who have "other special needs" -- has attracted both strong advocates and critics.

Proponents of the REI essentially argue that past and current policies and practices employed within the special education paradigm, as shaped by both tradition and PL 94-142, to identify, classify, place, and instruct students are based on flawed logic and assumptions, are inefficient, are programmatically and cost-ineffective, and, in many cases, are discriminatory (Lilly, 1988; 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Skrtic, 1987, 1988; Reschly, 1987, 1988; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Sapon-Shevin, 1989).

Advocates of the REI are calling for a restructuring of our public education system so that all students can be better served,

particularly those students who have been traditionally identified as "handicapped" as well as those students with "special needs" who are considered to be "falling through the cracks" of this system (e.g., students who may not presently qualify for special education services but who have unique needs -- children who are chemically dependent, abused children, homeless children, poor children, especially those from certain racial/ethnic minority groups etc.).

Opponents of the REI generally argue that advocates of the REI have not given given sufficiently careful or full consideration to the potentially dangerous implications of the REI movement for handicapped students. They contend that past and current special education policies and practices, e.g., those involving pupil identification, eligibility, and instruction, are essentially sound and, if abandoned too quickly, many handicapped students would likely suffer irreparable harm. Also, it is argued that hasty adoption of the REI would result in the loss of due process rights for many handicapped students and their parents (Byrnes, 1990; Carnine & Kameenui, 1990; Gerber, 1988; Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990; Kauffman, 1989; Keogh, 1988; Lieberman, 1990; Vergason & Anderegg, 1989).

Opponents state that most special education policies and practices have come about because of major deficiencies and inequities which exist within regular education and, therefore, it makes little sense to place handicapped students back into this very system, one which has not sufficiently demonstrated its willingness or capability to adequately serve these students (Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove, & Nelson, 1988; Gerber, 1988; Hallahan, Keller,

McKinney, Lloyd, & Bryan, 1988; Kauffman, 1989; Kauffman, Braaten, Nelson, Polsgrove, & Braaten, 1990).

Lack of Involvement of School Psychologists

School psychologists traditionally have played a critical role within the overall special education system -- especially with respect to the student identification component. In fact, the majority of handicapped students presently receiving educational services in our nation's schools have been identified by school psychologists or school psychological examiners. Nevertheless, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Coates, 1989; Graden, 1989; Reschly, 1987,1988; Ysseldyke, 1987a, 1987b) school psychologists, thus far, have been largely silent in the the REI discourse -- at least as reflected by publication in the education literature.

Certainly, the 1986 "Joint Position Statement" of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students and the National Association of School Psychologists focused on many of the salient issues which are currently being discussed in the REI debate. However, it appears that the majority of psychologists and psychological examiners who are currently practicing in our schools have demonstrated minimal awareness of, or interest in, the controversial REI discourse.

Implications of Lack of Involvement

It is suggested that the REI debate possesses serious implications for school psychologists. Unless they become more active in the contemporary dialogue involving student assessment issues, as well as programmatic issues and concerns for special needs and other at-risk students, two potentially negative consequences could occur: (1) a drastic reduction in the demand for professional psychological services in the schools, which could severely curtail employment potential, and -- of greater significance, (2) the denial of valuable and necessary psychological services to many special needs students, their parents, and their teachers.

Clearly, psychologists have not been alone in their suggested lack of participation or visibility relative to the REI debate. As cited by several writers (Coates, 1990; Davis, 1989, 1990; Skrtic, 1987, 1988) the REI discourse thus far has been primarily conducted among special educators who are representatives of institutions of higher education. There has been relatively minimal response from representatives of other key groups who have a vital, vested interest in this specific topic, most notably -- regular education personnel and parents. Despite this lack of involvement by broader constituencies, the issues which are currently being discussed as part of the REI discourse, irrespective of its eventual fate, are of sufficient importance and magnitude that they cannot be ignored.

School psychologists have a professional obligation (1) to become more aware of the specific issues and concerns being

addressed in the REI debate and (2) to assume an active role in its deliberations. Many of the policies and practices which are being critically analyzed in this national discourse involve the field of psychology, either directly or indirectly. The input of psychologists is extremely important, particularly in the areas of pupil identification/classification policies and practices, pupil placement decisions, student learning and behavioral characteristics, and teacher and parent consultation. In the absence of meaningful input from psychologists, ineffective and inappropriate policies and practices could be developed and implemented which may result in long-term negative consequences for many students.

Specific Issues for Psychologists

The issues involved in the current REI debate are multiple and complex. It is beyond the scope of this paper either to discuss all of them or to treat any one of them in great detail. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the following issues are representative of those which are of most critical concern and relevance to school psychologists.

(1) Pupil identification and classification: Psychologists and psychological examiners generally play a major, critical role in the process of identifying and classifying students for special education programming services. Their assessment results frequently are viewed as the most critical component in the pupil eligibility determination process. Students are identified as learning disabled, mentally retarded, or seriously emotionally disturbed based, to a

large extent, upon the results of assessments administered and interpreted by psychologists.

Controversies surrounding the administration and interpretation of psychological tests for identifying and labelling handicapped students certainly are not new. These assessment practices have long been the source of considerable controversy and concern to educators, parents, and advocates on several levels. Three of the most commonly cited criticisms levied at traditional "special education assessment practices" are that (1) they are discriminatory, often leading to the application of potentially harmful labels; (2) they are too time-consuming and too costly; and (3) they provide minimal, if any, relevant information regarding both what and how to teach students (methodology and curriculum irrelevance).

Despite these common criticisms of assessment practices, most school personnel and parents continue to rely heavily upon them in their efforts to develop and implement appropriate and meaningful educational programs for students considered to be in need of special education services. Should the REI be implemented fully -- or even partially -- as least as conceived of by most of its proponents, its impact on the role and responsibilities of school psychologists could be very significant. Clearly, it would appear that the need for assessment services would be substantially diminished. Although not all regulatory provisions relative to pupil assessment and due process would likely be eliminated, it is likely that under a unitary, general education system a much smaller number of students would be referred, thereby significantly reducing the need for psychological assessment services.

I am not suggesting that reducing the number of pupil assessments as part of the overall current special education process is wrong or necessarily bad. In fact, clear excesses appear to exist in this regard. Arguably too much time, money, and energy have been devoted to "assessing students" with little solid evidence, in many cases, that any substantive positive changes have resulted. A strong argument could be made that the time, money, and energy which have typically been required as part of student assessment policies and practices could much more effectively be channeled into other areas to help special needs students, e.g., more direct intervention time, increased availability of time for psychologists to consult and collaborate with teachers and parents regarding student programs etc.

However, critical decisions involving major alterations in current student assessment and identification policies and practices should not be made in isolation -- and certainly not without the expertise and input from psychologists. Psychologists and psychological examiners must be actively involved in decisions in this regard. They need to be included because they have relevant information to share.

Unfortunately, some psychologists will use this opportunity to engage in counterproductive "professional territorial defense" battles; still others likely will adopt a close-minded, rigid posture and defend assessment policies and practices which do, in fact, need changes, if not elimination. The real, critical reason, however, why professionals from the field of psychology must become involved in these deliberations is that they are being presented with a rare,

unusual opportunity to have a significant impact upon the future of schooling in America -- not simply the organizational aspects of schools but more importantly, the methods and processes by which students are taught.

(2) Pupil Placement: Psychologists also have had a major role in the placement practices involving handicapped students. Although special education regulations in most states prohibit psychologists from making specific student placement recommendations in their reports, as this decision generally is regarded as being the responsibility of the full child study team, the recommendations of psychologists often are weighted heavily in placement decisions. Regularly, the professional expertise of psychologists is sought relative to the issue of least restrictive environment.

Psychologists are routinely asked to offer advice as to what specific type of placement would be most instructionally and socially appropriate for identified handicapped students -- ranging from regular class to residential-type environments. In particular, the expertise of psychologists is sought when a student is being considered for possible placement within a residential setting. In fact, in some states, a student cannot be placed in a residential program without the specific recommendation of a licensed psychologist.

Thus far, the REI debate has focused largely on identification, instruction, and placement issues involving mildly and moderately handicapped students. There has not been a great deal of discussion

relative to these same issues for severely handicapped students. Yet, if several emerging trends continue, it is projected that during the next ten to twenty years our nation's schools will witness a much different "special education population" than presently exists. Our schools will be required to provide special education programs and related services (e.g., counseling) to significantly larger numbers of more severely handicapped children and youth.

Among the reasons cited for the projected significant rise in the number and proportion of severely handicapped students who are expected to enter our schools during the next two decades are (1) the alarming increase in the number of crack-cocaine and other drug-related births to young mothers (Baumeister, Kupstas, & Klindworth, 1990; Greer, 1990); (2) the increase in the number of HIV-infected children who will be entering school (Baumeister, Kupstas, & Klindworth, 1990); and (3) the increasing number of children who possess severe disabilities, e.g., Trisomy 13 and Trisomy 18, who are currently living longer due to medical advances and who, therefore, will be eligible for special education programming services (Buehler, 1990).

It can be assumed with a reasonable degree of certainty that many of these students will require comprehensive, intensive services -- including those which are most appropriately provided by psychologists. Some of these students will require individual counseling. Teachers and parents will need help in dealing with many of the emotional and behavioral problems likely to be manifested by many of these students. Likewise, teachers and support staff who will be required to work on a regular basis with

these populations of students predictably will require considerable emotional and professional support

It is unclear what specific implications the REI, if implemented, would have on this projected "new population" of special education students. However, it is clear that psychologists will (or, should) have a major role to play in the overall service delivery system for these students. In particular, it is suggested that the expertise of psychologists will be required regarding delicate placement issues which will almost certainly arise when large numbers of these students enter school. It is imperative, therefore, that psychologists immediately begin to engage in professional dialogue with school personnel regarding "future considerations" involving these specific populations.

(3) Changing roles and responsibilities: The REI debate has focused on several issues other than pupil identification and classification which could impact directly upon the specific roles and responsibilities that school psychologists and psychological examiners have in local school systems. Should the REI be implemented, it is likely that some major shifts will occur in the overall psychological service delivery system that presently exits in most of our nation's schools. Certainly some of these suggested "shifts" have already occurred in many systems, irrespective of the REI movement per se, because they are considered to represent sound and effective professional practice. Yet, it is suggested that the REI debate will help bring about some significant changes in psychological services for many schools.

The REI essentially places the primary, if not total, responsibility on regular classroom teachers for delivering instructional programs to all students -- including the large majority of those students who are currently receiving their instructional programs in special education settings. Presumably, many of these teachers, because of their limited training in dealing with special needs students, will require substantially more consultation relative to how to most appropriately deal with these students.

Clearly, much of this suggested increased need for consultation relative to student programming could, and will, be met by special educators. Presently, many schools operate very effective special education consultation-type models. Nevertheless, I strongly suspect that there will be a major increase in the demand for school psychologists to engage in meaningful collaborative consultation with regular class teachers regarding students with special needs, especially those students who manifest significant emotional/behavioral problems.

In a similar vein, should the barriers (philosophically, programmatically, and fiscally) between special education and regular education be dissolved, and a unitary education system be operationalized, as is advocated by REI proponents, it is suggested that psychologists will need to assume even greater responsibilities than they presently do for collaborative consultation at the prereferral level. At first glance, this suggestion may appear to make little sense. If the special education structure as we now know it is dissolved, then to what and to whom would students be referred?

REI advocates are calling for a restructuring of the system which delivers services to students. They are not calling for the elimination of these services. Simply, necessary instructional and support services would be provided in a setting (the regular classroom for the most part) which allows for greater social (and instructional) integration and less opportunity for stigmatization. In fact, it is suggested by REI advocates that all students, including those currently identified as "handicapped", could be provided with an even greater array of appropriate and diversified services if the present dual educational system is eliminated.

Thus, it is suggested that the need for collaborative consultation by psychologists within the area of early intervention assistance will increase, not decrease, under a unitary education system model. There will exist an increased demand for assistance with selecting appropriate and meaningful student instructional and social experiences, as well as program options. Teachers and parents will require more assistance in dealing with their "own issues" involving the total integration model.

Graden (1989) provides an in-depth analysis of many of the critical issues involving effective collaborative consultation -- or, intervention assistance -- by school psychologists within the are of student referral, suggesting that, "we must continue to build and expand on ways to to provide alternative approaches to more traditional referral practices in special education" (p. 230).

Under a unitary education system wherein special education and regular education programs are truly blended, there would likely exist much less need for individual pupil assessment by

psychology personnel along with a much greater need for consultation and intervention assistance. Whereas in the present, a significant proportion of time and energy is directed toward "testing students" in order to determine their eligibility for special education programs, this specific demand would no longer exit -- at least not to the same present magnitude.

Presumably, fewer demands within the assessment domain would allow psychologists to devote substantially more of their time and energy to student, teacher, administrator, and parent intervention assistance. School psychologists likely would find themselves spending substantially more of their time in classrooms observing students and consulting with teachers relative to student programs.

Call For Involvement in the REI Debate:

Clearly, one can only speculate upon what impact, if any, the current REI debate ultimately will have upon the future roles and responsibilities of school psychologists. Some critics of the REI movement claim that this discourse represents little more than an "academic exercise" being perpetuated by a very small number of university professors, concluding that "nothing of substance will result from this dialogue." This assertion, in fact, may prove to be accurate. However, regardless of how one personally views the REI discourse, I suggest that the issues and concerns being addressed as part of this dialogue are very important ones, and they should not be dismissed in cavalier fashion.

The REI debate challenges us to rigorously reevaluate public education's commitment to serving handicapped and other special needs, at-risk students, as well as to assess its present level of organizational readiness necessary to not only accommodate but also to respect and value student differences. It challenges us to reexamine many long-held assumptions about how handicapped students can most effectively be instructed and -- within which educational environments. It raises several serious questions about past and present special education policies and practices. Finally, it provides us with a rare opportunity to stimulate our thinking -- to help shape future national, state, and local policies involving the education of our nation's youth.

School psychologists need to become much more active in this debate for three major reasons. First, their expertise is necessary for helping to clarify many of the involved issues. Second, they have a professional responsibility to contribute to this dialogue. And, third -- on a much more personal, or as some might suggest, opportunistic or self preservation level -- the REI could have a direct impact on their future employment possibilities.

Although unlikely to occur -- and certainly not a topic which has been openly discussed thus far, the "loosening of special education regulations", particularly within the areas of pupil identification and program eligibility, could lead some school administrators to conclude that services currently being provided by psychologists would no longer be needed. Clearly, the excessive cost related to pupil assessments has been raised consistently. In fact, the escalating cost of special education in recent years presently is

being viewed as threatening an imminent and major backlash by school administrators and the public at large against special education programs in America (Zirkel, 1990).

Thus, it is conceivable that -- for not necessarily the correct reasons -- or for reasons which benefit students -- psychological services could be drastically curtailed. It could be argued that this situation would be even more likely to obtain in those school systems in which the salaries of psychologists are directly tied to federal special education funding mechanisms.

Some psychologists will likely find this last suggested reason for becoming involved in the REI debate to be personally and professionally insulting. I too find this suggestion to "smack of insult and derision." Yet, this is not my intent. Very simply, I raise this issue because I believe that it is a real one -- and it cannot be entirely ignored. Further, should this be the issue to motivate psychologists to increase their level of awareness about the critical concerns being addressed in the REI debate, and even better, should it serve as a catalyst for their becoming more active participants and contributors in this discourse -- the chances of this debate having a positive impact on the lives of students will be enhanced. In my judgment, the issues being addressed by the REI are that critical.

School psychologists can become active participants in the contemporary REI debate on two different levels: (1) professional and organizational, and (2) local school.

First, on a broad-based professional level, there exist several different vehicles for REI debate participation. Research can be conducted related to many of the relevant issues (e.g., student

learning characteristics which may or may not require differential instructional strategies; techniques for improving student self-esteem in mainstreamed environments; effective coping strategies for both students and teachers; strategies for promoting more effective collaboration between regular class teachers and specialists, etc.).

Psychologists can publish their research findings and offer "position statements" on the REI in the professional literature -- including education journals. Papers on issues and concerns related to the REI can be presented at professional conferences and symposia. Finally, psychologists can become active in REI-related issues at the policymaking level.

At the local school level, the active participation of school psychologists in the REI discourse may have even greater impact. Open, honest discussions can be held with teachers, administrators, and parents regarding many of the salient issues being addressed. Psychologists can participate in the process of reexamining and reevaluating many of the current special education policies and practices which are in place at the local school system level. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the present dual education system can be assessed.

Modifications designed to improve the overall service delivery system to special needs and other students considered to be "at risk" can be discussed. Psychologists can help staff members focus more effectively on the various sources of concern and frustration involved in the REI debate. In brief, school psychologists can find various ways in which to assist others regarding REI issues at the

local school level -- and, at the same time, increase their own level of awareness of critical issues which are involved.

Regardless of the particular level or intensity of involvement, what is important is that school psychologists become involved in the issues and concerns currently being addressed as part of the REI discourse. These issues and concerns are too critical to ignore. School psychologists have a professional responsibility to both themselves and to their clients to become more active participants in this debate.

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